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JULIA H. FAWCETT. *Spectacular Disappearances: Celebrity and Privacy, 1696–1801*. Ann Arbor: Michigan, 2016. Pp. x + 280. \$65.

Celebrities—whether they acquired their fame in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first—have always faced a dilemma. On the one hand, their existence as celebrated individuals, not to mention their income, depends on their fans. Their works, their images, and information about their lives need to be mediated to the largest possible audience for the celebrity apparatus to function. On the other hand, the public gaze can quickly start to seem intrusive. Private lives, details of love affairs, and even bodies are treated as public property. Celebrities thus find themselves caught between wooing public attention and resisting it, between inviting the public to get to know them more intimately and trying to preserve a sense of private selfhood.

The fans that sustain celebrity also make it feel toxic; they like the opportunity to peer behind the celebrity's staged public image and are rarely content to consume only the image that is constructed for them. Instead, they want to supplement that image with an ever more intimate knowledge of the celebrity; every revelation of hidden selfhood spurs a desire for further revelations, and every attempt to keep the public at a distance simply whets its appetite for a greater sense of closeness.

In recent years, a number of critics and historians have examined this dialectic of revelation and concealment and mapped its historical emergence. While they differ on the details of when and how our modern celebrity culture was born, many have looked to the eighteenth century for clues to its genesis. The emergence of a modern print culture, a theatrical star system, an enlarged reading and viewing public, and a modern conception of subjectivity all played their part, while celebrity in turn helped to shape the development of these cultural formations.

Ms. Fawcett's distinctive contribution is to show how the rhetoric of revelation on which celebrity relies can also function as a strategy of concealment. She calls this "overexpression." It works like dazzle camouflage—the celebrities disappear behind the exaggerated marks of their visibility. The black page of *Tristram Shandy* provides an emblem of this strategy: it is so covered with ink, so overwritten, that it tells us nothing at all. The celebrities of stage and page examined in this book "exaggerate into illegibility the marks by which their spectators might recognize them." Ms. Fawcett traces the history of this strategy across the long eighteenth century, showing how it was used in distinctive ways, with varying degrees of success, by men and women, actors and writers.

This study begins with Colley Cibber, whose foppish costumes and mannered performances were widely mocked, not least by Pope in *The Dunciad*. Ms. Fawcett argues that Cibber had the last laugh; his autobiography, with its farrago of overwritten passages, misspellings, and malapropisms, left his critics unable to do anything but repeat Cibber's own self-representations. The *lingua Cibberiana* proliferated among his supporters and detractors equally. His signature prop—the huge wig he wore in the role of Lord Foppington in Vanburgh's *The Relapse*—became an unstable signifier that exaggerated a masculine accessory to the point where the wig connoted effeminacy. This kind of excess and instability of signification made Cibber much talked about but never really known.

Ms. Fawcett persuasively shows how this strategy of overexpression was passed down throughout the century and adapted by its inheritors. David Garrick drew on some of Cibber's tricks, even as he developed an acting style that defined itself against Cibber's. His fans were divided between praising his 'natural' acting for the emotions that he felt during his performances and recognizing the professionalism of his technical ability to convey emotions he

was in fact not feeling. Sterne, meanwhile, was conflated with his characters of Tristram and Yorick to such an extent that it was hard to tell where the “real” Sterne could be found.

Overexpression was not equally effective for women. As Ms. Fawcett demonstrates, women such as Charlotte Charke and George Anne Bellamy had a harder time deflecting the public’s intrusive gaze than their male counterparts. One reason for this was that the public was more reluctant to read women’s performances on stage or page as anything other than sincere. Where Garrick came across as a consummate professional who was praised for simulating emotion on the stage rather than simply feeling it, female actors were more likely to be understood as ingenuously feeling the emotions they exhibited. For Charke and Bellamy, then, overexpression was often read as a fuller and more revealing kind of self-expression, leaving them vulnerable to exactly the intrusive attention they sought to resist.

Mary Robinson—actress, poet, author, and sometime mistress of the Prince of Wales—is singled out as a woman who, at the very end of the century, was able to modify the inherited strategy of overexpression in such a way as to make it work for her. Borrowing generic markers and rhetorical techniques from the newly popular fashion magazines, Robinson “reconceive[d] the relationship between a celebrity and her public until they want no longer to own or to contain her but rather to be her.” This allowed Robinson to abscond from the public’s scrutiny without sacrificing her celebrity.

The object of enquiry here remains the celebrated individuals discussed, and the strategy of overexpression they evolve, rather than celebrity culture as a wider phenomenon. Ms. Fawcett does not offer a fully argued historical account of why and how celebrity culture emerged when it did. Rather, her concern is with the rhetorical and performative strategies employed by the celebrities themselves. While she pays attention to their audiences, and the ways in which fans

and critics responded to them, her focus remains on the celebrated individuals. Ms. Fawcett wants “to examine celebrity culture . . . from the perspectives of the celebrities themselves” in order to “understand these celebrities as authors in their own right.” Doing so risks overstating the agency of celebrity personalities in the cultural apparatus of celebrity. The many other people involved in constructing a public image—artists, publishers, journalists, costumiers, caricaturists—tend to get less attention. One of the ways in which celebrity culture works is by making the efforts of these people invisible, and so historians of celebrity could do more to bring them out of the shadows.

This is, however, a thoroughly researched and well-written study and a pleasure to read. Ms. Fawcett’s analyses are well informed, sophisticated, and often witty. Her concept of “over-expression” offers a valuable new way to understand the rhetorical strategies of eighteenth-century celebrity, with implications for our understanding of performance history, gender identities, life writing, and the formation of modern subjectivity.

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